

James Patterson's Latest Villain Looks a Lot Like Amazon; Inside the List

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Highlight: "The Store," at No. 4 after three weeks on the hardcover fiction list, features a married couple at war with a dominant online retailer.

Body

GODZILLA VERSUS MOTHRA: James Patterson's latest diversion, "The Store," is about a mass-market behemoth standing astride the globe, anticipating and manipulating customers' desires in a bid for total cultural domination. Surprisingly, it is not an autobiography. The store of the title is an Amazon-like tech company with management anger issues, which reacts murderously when it discovers that a couple of married employees plan a tell-all book. If nothing else, it will leave you questioning the wisdom of drone delivery.

Patterson versus Amazon feels a little like Godzilla versus Mothra, and the novel (written with Richard DiLallo) is doing predictably well; after three weeks, it's at No. 4 on the hardcover fiction list. Readers familiar with the book business may wonder whether Patterson — whose publisher, Little, Brown & Company, had a protracted and public feud with Amazon a few years ago — is exacting revenge here, but they'll have to draw their own conclusions. When Patterson was asked about his choice of villains last month on the public radio show "Marketplace," he deflected the question with impressive dexterity for the engineer of runaway narrative locomotives like the Alex Cross series. Still, his allegiance was clear. "I'm not maligning a big, fat bookstore," Patterson said. "I'm maligning the idea of monopolies in the country. And in particular, I think it's a problem when it threatens publishing, because I think that books are really important in our lives, especially books that we can't live without. And I think right now the people that are best equipped to put out serious books are publishers. That may evolve over time, but right now publishers are pretty good at finding those books and paying to have them done and making sure that people are aware that they exist."

MACHINE DREAMS: If Patterson takes a bleak view of technology and its Big Brother implications, the physicist Max Tegmark is more cautiously optimistic in "Life 3.0," new on the hardcover nonfiction list at No. 11. Tegmark is a professor at M.I.T. and the president of the Future of Life Institute; in a recent interview with the website The Verge, he discussed the potential benefits of artificial intelligence: "If you care about poverty, social justice, climate change, disease — all of these problems stump us because we're not smart enough to figure out how to solve them, but if we can amplify our own intelligence with machine intelligence, far beyond ours, we have an incredible potential to do better."

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